

# Department of Human Services

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## Day 1: How state's big system failed this little boy

January 28, 2007

BY RUBY L. BAILEY, JACK KRESNAK and TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

In photos, Isaac Lethbridge looks like a mischievous, dimpled elf. He has a big grin and electric blue eyes in a cheery, heart-shaped face. It's hard to imagine that face toward the end, covered with green and blue bruises, both eyes blackened.

Isaac traveled a painful journey in his 2 1/2 years. He was neglected by his parents, moved through three troubled foster homes in less than a year and was dead by last Aug. 16, beaten and burned, his collarbone broken.

What happened to him under state supervision exposes a child welfare system so overwhelmed and lax in its oversight that, despite attempts at reform, children still are being placed in danger.

A Free Press examination of court records, trial testimony and state investigative reports shows that during his 11 months in foster care, there were many people who could have saved Isaac. No one did.

The Free Press found:

- Less than two weeks before he died, Isaac's social worker, a supervisor and two doctors saw dark bruises on the toddler. But no one tried to remove him from his foster home.
- The Lula Belle Stewart Center -- the Detroit-based agency overseeing Isaac's care -- should never have licensed the boy's second foster mother because the state had substantiated a claim of neglect against her.
- The state investigated more than a dozen complaints about the homes where Isaac lived. Critics of the Michigan Department of Human Services say the number of complaints should have raised alarms even if they weren't all substantiated.
- Isaac was put in foster homes crowded with older children, some with histories of sexual abuse, mental health problems or violent behavior. Troubled children were allowed to care for him unsupervised.
- The state renewed Lula Belle's license in July 2005, even though the agency had come under scrutiny in the 2004 beating death of another child and had failed to conduct regular home visits for all of its foster children or to assure regular physical exams.
- Attorneys assigned to monitor Isaac say they could not locate him on several occasions because Lula Belle didn't notify them when he was moved.

After Isaac's death, the state Department of Human Services suspended Lula Belle's license - the first time in at least four years it had taken such action against one of the hundreds of agencies paid by the state to place kids in foster care. It was clear from the state's own investigation that the problems didn't happen overnight.

"There were a tremendous amount of lies" by Lula Belle officials, DHS director Marianne Udow told the Free Press.

But the state, too, had failed to detect problems in the foster homes and at Lula Belle, until after Isaac's death. Then, investigators found plenty.

Critics say Isaac's death demonstrates broader shortcomings in the state human services department, which often relies on inexperienced, overburdened workers and outdated

methods to police itself. The department currently has just 12 licensing workers to oversee the 500 public and private agencies paid by the state to license 7,840 homes that provide care for 18,660 children.

Ken Merritt, an attorney representing Lula Belle, defended the center, saying it didn't know of any serious problems. "We're not responsible for Isaac's death," he said.

Merritt maintained that Lula Belle officials called Michigan's Child Protective Services on Aug. 4 -- 12 days before Isaac's death -- to notify investigators of his bruises. Merritt said a protective services worker rejected the complaint over the phone.

But a state DHS investigation concluded there was no record of any call from Lula Belle that day. Indeed, the state said, there were other instances in which bruises on Isaac and his 3-year-old sister, who was in foster care with him, weren't reported.

Elizabeth Carey, executive director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families, which represents private nonprofit agencies, said DHS did not provide adequate oversight of Lula Belle.

"There used to be a lot more staff in contracting and licensing" at DHS, she said, "and they didn't just come out during a crisis. ... They used to find an Isaac before it happened."

### **Parents' record of neglect**

Isaac was Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge's eighth child.

He was born at home on Nov. 7, 2003, in Pell Lake, Wis., where his parents had moved to avoid Child Protective Services in Michigan and Ohio. They'd fled Ohio a year earlier when Isaac's sister -- whom the Free Press is not naming because of her age -- was born at their home near Toledo. Her birth wasn't registered and the family went into hiding when, alerted by Michigan, Ohio Child Protective Services tried to investigate.

Six children had already been permanently removed for neglect from the Lethbridges in Michigan.

The couple met in 1989, when he was 15 and she was 13, and married in 1995, two years after their first child, a daughter, was born blind and with multiple medical problems. By 1997, they had four children under age 5, and were expecting a fifth. That year, Washtenaw County Child Protective Services received the first of many complaints that the couple was neglecting the children.

In April 1998, the state removed the four oldest children, a girl and three boys, from their home in Ann Arbor. The next month, the couple had a baby boy and he was removed.

The DHS and the Washtenaw County Family Court then began years of efforts, including counseling and financial help, to try to reunite the family, according to court records. The state even paid \$1,500 in past-due utility bills. But well into the process, one caseworker noted: "The parents cannot acknowledge that there are any problems. The parents do not seem willing to change or rectify the conditions that brought these children to our attention."

Doctors told the court that Jennifer Lethbridge was bipolar and had a personality disorder that made it hard for her to take responsibility for her actions.

The Lethbridges -- he is now 33 and she is 30 -- admit they made mistakes, including hiding from DHS the fact that their disabled oldest child was hurt when she fell out of her wheelchair as her father pushed her down the front steps of their home. This was during a time when DHS was monitoring the family.

The couple say they were young and struggling and Matt Lethbridge had lost a good-paying job at a toner cartridge recycling company.

In April 2001, citing information the children's foster parents brought to the court's attention and a seeming lack of progress from the Lethbridges, a Washtenaw County judge terminated the couple's parental rights to their five children. The next year, the court ended their rights to a sixth child, a boy born in September 2001 who had been placed in foster care almost immediately. Other families later adopted all of them.

"We didn't understand completely what it takes to be good parents," Jennifer Lethbridge said.

### **Running from authorities**

Isaac's birth was registered in Wisconsin. But soon, a complaint was filed there alleging their home was filthy and had no running water or heat. When Child Protective Services tried to check, the family pulled up stakes again.

Back in Michigan in 2005, money was tight. The family was living in a run-down rented home on Avondale Street in Westland and the Lethbridges weren't getting along. In April, Matt Lethbridge, who was working for a technology company in Troy, lost that job and the couple separated for several months.

"Every day I woke up and said, 'Is this the day? Is this the day that I have to walk my kids to the DHS office because I can't feed them?' " Jennifer Lethbridge said.

Alerted to problems, police knocked on the door on Sept. 19, 2005. Jennifer Lethbridge didn't want to let them in. Officers said more than a dozen birds were flying freely inside, their droppings everywhere. Maggots crawled on bags of trash and the stench of feces and garbage permeated the air.

Isaac, then almost 2, and his 3-year-old sister were playing with rotten food on the floor. Dirty diapers littered the house. Flies circled food on the kitchen counter. A few days after police removed the two children, the house was condemned.

The Lethbridges were charged with neglect. Jennifer -- then pregnant with her ninth child -- spent 45 days in jail. Matt received a suspended sentence.

### **Foster home No. 1**

Isaac's first stop in foster care was at Martina Brown's tiny brick house on Troester Street on Detroit's east side. When he and his sister arrived on Sept. 19, 2005, the house was already brimming with children.

Brown, who was divorced and a high school dropout who'd earned a GED, had adopted five children during her tenure as a licensed foster parent with Orchards Children's Services of Southfield from 1991 to 1999. Foster parents receive \$14.24 to \$17.59 a day or more to care for kids, depending on their age and services required.

When Brown sought to renew her foster care license through Lula Belle in mid-2004, she told a worker she'd had complaints filed against her with Child Protective Services during her time with Orchards but none was substantiated. According to Brown's file, the Lula Belle worker asked Orchards for the records and was told they couldn't be found. The Lula Belle licensing went through.

Reached in North Carolina, where she now lives, Brown, 40, would not discuss details of the investigations. "In those reports, they will tell you when they investigated, it was unsubstantiated -- that it did not happen, and that was that," she said.

Some neighbors, however, were wary of the home. Robert Grimm said he wouldn't let his grandchildren play at Brown's house because there seemed to be little supervision.

"They would run up and down the street and often stay out late until 10 p.m.," Grimm said. "There were lots of grown-ups coming and going, too."

A few weeks after Isaac and his sister were placed with Brown, their court-appointed attorney, Lorena Jaquet, visited. She reported to Child Protective Services that Brown's home was dirty and that she was concerned about the number of children living there, but no action was taken.

Brown insists she was a good foster parent.

"I did what I had to do to take care of my children," she said.

Isaac and his sister's stay with Brown lasted about three months, cut short by her move to North Carolina.

**Foster home No. 2**

Isaac's next stop: The home of Patricia Kennedy.

Kennedy, a longtime foster mother who had nine adopted children, knew Brown and sometimes babysat for her. Kennedy had been licensed through Lula Belle in 2000, but had let the license expire in July 2005. At the time, she was behind in her foster parent training and had failed to schedule a required home visit for licensing.

But that November, she applied for a new license through Lula Belle.

Kennedy was living on Ohio Street on Detroit's west side. The agency's workers had previously noted that the home was in disrepair and Kennedy was slow to fix the problems. Still, the agency quickly gave her a new license on Dec. 20, 2005.

Isaac and his sister arrived two days later.

The children should never have been placed with her, the Free Press found, because a Child Protective Services investigation had substantiated a claim of neglect against her in March 2005 after her heat and electricity were shut off for nonpayment. Several of her adopted children were living with her at the time.

Kennedy's name should have been placed on the state's Central Registry, a confidential list of confirmed cases of abuse and neglect. And that would have barred her from regaining her foster care license. While it is unclear when her name was put on the registry, Kennedy told the Free Press that Lula Belle workers checked it when she applied for a new license in late 2005 and told her that her record was clear.

In January, Shirley Anderson-Titus, a new court-appointed lawyer assigned to monitor Isaac and his sister, was looking for them for a required home visit. She told supervisors later that Lula Belle hadn't told her the children had been moved from Brown's home and messages she left at the agency weren't returned. Anderson-Titus finally located the children at Kennedy's home and visited on Jan. 24, 2006. She didn't report any problems.

At the time, at least four of Kennedy's adopted children still were living at the home. Some had psychological problems and brushes with juvenile court.

One daughter, who'd been diagnosed with mental retardation and schizophrenia, had set the family basement on fire, destroying it, several years earlier. The girl once had also cut her sister with a knife and chased her with scissors. Her psychologist deemed her a "clear threat to others," court records show.

Kennedy's 16-year-old son had assaulted his brother in March 2005, punching him in the face. The charge landed him in juvenile court for a second time. A third son had a history of truancy.

Kennedy, 61, was battling health problems, including diabetes. Veda D. Thompkins, a friend and Detroit foster parent, said she told Kennedy to return Isaac and his sister to Lula Belle and concentrate on her health.

"She had good intentions," Thompkins said. "She was just overwhelmed."

**Skipped visits to home**

Soon after Isaac and his sister were placed with Kennedy, one of her daughters noticed while changing the little girl's diaper that her genital area was swollen.

"They called me and said, 'Mommy, come see this,' " Kennedy said.



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## Problems with center preceded Isaac's case

License renewed despite concerns

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BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Despite several licensing violations by the Lula Belle Stewart Center and a 2004 state report that criticized the agency over the beating death of a 4-year-old foster child that year, the Michigan Department of Human Services renewed the Detroit-based agency's license to place children in 2005.

A Free Press review of hundreds of pages of state records found many of the same problems in the case of 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge -- problems that should have been addressed in previous cases.

Among past problems:

- A foster child placed by Lula Belle suffered a skull fracture and was not given immediate medical treatment in 2003. Authorities were unable to determine who caused the injury. However, when Lula Belle workers licensed the foster home, they did not know the foster mother had been investigated for possible abuse at her day care center a few years earlier.
- A Lula Belle foster care worker and supervisor received written reprimands from the state DHS in 2004 after 4-year-old Cesol Thompson was killed by his father's 18-year-old girlfriend during a weekend home visit. The workers had failed to report suspected abuse by Johnetta Sullivan, who is now in prison for second-degree murder. Also, the workers did not investigate her background as they are required for a new person living with the child's parent.

A report issued a few months later by the state Office of Children's Ombudsman, the state's watchdog agency for children, found no fault with Child Protective Services, but was critical of Lula Belle for not reporting its previous suspicions to protective services in the Thompson case. Lula Belle officials agreed to retrain all staff members on their legal duty to report suspected abuse.

A key issue in Isaac's death two years later was the failure of Lula Belle workers to report suspected abuse to protective services.

The DHS Office of Children and Adult Licensing, as part of a regular review, concluded in July 2005 that Lula Belle should continue supervising nearly 200 foster children.

In making the decision, the state checked eight of the center's 79 foster home files and eight of 179 files on foster children.

The sampling found that Lula Belle was in compliance with "all applicable rules and statutes" even though in more than half of the cases reviewed, Lula Belle had not arranged for physical exams for the children and Lula Belle workers had not visited the children in their homes as often as required.

Nevertheless, a state licensing official recommended that Lula Belle continue operating under a regular license once it submitted a corrective action plan.

"What we found there wasn't evidence that things were that serious," state licensing director James Gale told the Free Press, referring to the 2005 report. "We have to rely on the agency to give us accurate information."

A year later, state licensing and child abuse workers found an array of serious problems in an investigation spurred by Isaac's beating death Aug. 16: Several Lula Belle foster children were in dangerous or unacceptable placements, 21 children could not immediately be found, and

several were not in the foster homes reported by Lula Belle or were living in other states without DHS approval.

Documentation in many Lula Belle files, the DHS found, contained errors or outright falsehoods. And once again, Lula Belle's workers often had not made home visits to check on foster children, in some cases for months.

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## **LOSING ISAAC ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

### **Family's timeline**

Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge's nine children became state wards. The two youngest remain in foster care. Here is a brief history of the family's struggles:

**April 1997:** Washtenaw County receives first of many reports that the Lethbridges are neglecting their four children.

**April 1998:** Washtenaw Department of Human Services places the children in foster care.

**May 17, 1998:** Jennifer Lethbridge gives birth to a fifth child, a boy. Days later, he's placed in foster care in Washtenaw County.

**April 25, 2001:** Washtenaw County family judge orders termination of the couple's rights to their five children.

**Sept. 15, 2001:** The Lethbridges have another child, a boy, in Windsor. A hospital social worker, suspicious of their explanation for why they came across the border, calls child welfare officials. They take temporary custody of the baby for his protection after checking with child protection workers in Washtenaw County. Eventually, he is returned to Michigan and placed in foster care.

**Aug. 14, 2002:** Living in Lucas County, Ohio, near Toledo, the Lethbridges give birth to a daughter. They don't register the birth and flee when child protection officials try to take her.

**Aug. 21, 2002:** A Washtenaw County judge ends their parental rights to the son born in Windsor.

**Nov. 7, 2003:** Isaac Lethbridge is born at home in Wisconsin, where the family went after leaving Ohio. They register his birth but move again in summer 2004 after a complaint that their home lacks running water.

**Sept. 19, 2005:** Isaac and his 3-year-old sister are removed from filthy conditions in the family's Westland home. During the next 11 months, the Lula Belle Stewart Center in Detroit sends them to three foster homes.

**Feb. 23, 2006:** The Lethbridges' first child, Ashleigh, who has multiple disabilities, dies after a seizure in her adoptive home in Detroit at age 12.

**April 10, 2006:** The ninth child, a girl, is born at home in Whitmore Lake. Her birth isn't registered. She is placed in foster care later that month.

**Aug. 16, 2006:** Isaac is fatally beaten and burned in a Detroit foster home. His sister is moved to a Washtenaw County foster home with her sister.

### **Mismanagement**

After Isaac Lethbridge's beating death Aug. 16, 2006, Michigan Department of Human Services foster care licensing workers reviewed files of the Lula Belle Stewart Center, the Detroit nonprofit agency that handled Isaac's care. The review found several instances of mismanagement and deficiencies, including:

- More than a third of Lula Belle's 84 foster homes had expired licenses.
- Lula Belle failed to investigate at least five allegations of child abuse or neglect.
- Lula Belle's records were lax and the agency was often late in reevaluating homes.
- Workers sometimes falsified visitation records, skipping monthly visits. Some foster parents didn't see workers for months.

### **Lula Belle Stewart Center profile**

**What is it?** It's a private, nonprofit Detroit social services agency.

**When was it founded?** 1972.

**What does it do?** It provides housing and other support to pregnant and parenting teens. It added foster care child placement services in 1993. The Michigan Department of Human Services suspended the center's foster care license Aug. 21, 2006.

**Who is it named after?** The late Dr. Lula Belle Stewart of Detroit. The center says Stewart was the country's first African-American pediatric cardiologist.

**What's next?** A hearing on the center's license suspension appeal is scheduled for Feb. 7.

### **Report abuse**

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, call your county Department of Human Services. These numbers are answered 24 hours a day:

- Wayne: 800-716-2234.
- Oakland: 866-975-5010.
- Macomb: 586-412-6109.

- Monroe: 734-243-7400.
- Genesee: 810-760-2222.
- Washtenaw: 734-481-9110.
- Livingston: 517-546-8668.



## Unheeded warnings

All the signs were there that Isaac Lethbridge was in trouble. But everyone ignored them, until he died.

January 29, 2007

BY RUBY L. BAILEY, JACK KRESNAK and TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

On paper and by reputation at the Lula Belle Stewart Center, Charlsie Adams-Rogers was a good foster parent who could provide a safe, nurturing home for 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge and his 3-year-old sister.

Workers at the Detroit-based foster-care placement agency frequently complimented Adams-Rogers' child care skills and training in their reports. She was known among employees and other foster parents for her mentoring and advocacy work.

But a closer look by the Free Press found irregularities in how she was assessed for her foster-care license and a string of complaints that failed to raise alarms.

For a 2005 review, a Lula Belle worker simply cut and pasted Adams-Rogers' evaluation from her 2004 review. Her evaluations in 2003, 2004 and 2005 warned that she risked burnout from outside activities, but her license was still renewed.

Adams-Rogers, 59, also had a history of complaints alleging mistreatment of children in her home. Though Child Protective Services never substantiated any of the nine complaints, people familiar with the child welfare system say the allegations should have raised red flags about what was going on in the brick home on Greenlawn in northwest Detroit.

Critics say the number suggests a pattern of turmoil that should have triggered closer scrutiny of Adams-Rogers by officials at Lula Belle or licensing workers from the state Department of Human Services. The scrutiny was critical, experts say, because young, fragile children were involved.

Adams-Rogers calls Isaac's death a "horrible, horrible accident."

"I've been helping kids all my life," Adams-Rogers said. "I got into foster care to help children."

### Rules bent for foster mom

Adams-Rogers' foster-care career began in January 1999, about two years after she retired as an inspector at the Chrysler Sterling Stamping Plant. Lula Belle licensed her shortly after she took in 10 nieces and nephews whose parents had neglected them.

Her provisional license allowed her to receive state funds for the large brood.

Because Adams-Rogers' home had only three bedrooms, the state Department of Human Services gave her an exemption to rules that generally don't allow five children to sleep in one bedroom.

By that April, the 10 children had returned to their parents, and Lula Belle sent four other foster children -- all boys -- to Adams-Rogers' home. Two months later, she asked that they be removed because she was leaving town for a while.

By the end of July, Adams-Rogers was back in the foster-care business. That's when Lula Belle gave her a regular license for as many as four children up to age 17.

Over the years, she received exemptions to care for up to eight children at a time. She estimates she took in 50 foster children.

When Isaac and his sister arrived on June 29, 2006, Adams-Rogers had three adopted children -- ages 18, 12 and 1 -- and two foster children ages 17 and 16 living with her.

All had "significant histories as child victims of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, as well as neglect," the DHS said in court records.

Lula Belle workers apparently didn't think twice about sending the two Lethbridge children into a crowded setting with unstable teens and a disturbed adolescent.

Later, a judge noted: "All the flags were up. All the signs were there."

Except everyone ignored them.

### **A house full of trouble**

In interviews with the Free Press, Adams-Rogers acknowledged that she had a big family and a busy household. In addition to her adopted and foster children, she had three adult biological children, 12 grandsons and three great-grandchildren.

One of her sons had a troubled past. Terrance Rogers, 29, was sentenced to 3 months in a state boot camp in 1995 for receiving and concealing stolen property. He also pleaded guilty to domestic-violence charges involving a girlfriend in 2001 and 2002, and served several months in jail for violating probation in those cases. That should have raised eyebrows at Lula Belle during licensing reviews because, in court records as recent as 2003, Terrance listed his mother's address as his own.

Adams-Rogers insists that Terrance didn't live with her, but the DHS noted in an Aug. 24 Wayne County Family Court filing that adults, including Terrance, secretly lived in the house.

The home was "family headquarters," Adams-Rogers said, where relatives often dropped by during the week, came for Sunday dinner and sometimes stayed a few days.

"It does not mean the house was out of control," she said.

Adams-Rogers' adopted 12-year-old daughter was often seen in charge of Isaac and his sister. Court records say she struggled with inappropriate sexual behavior and was physically and verbally aggressive.

"She needs to be constantly monitored on a daily basis," a Lula Belle worker wrote of the girl, who told investigators after Isaac died that she might have accidentally injured him.

One of Adams-Rogers' foster children, a teen with cerebral palsy who had been sexually abused, was in therapy and took prescription medicines, the DHS said.

Before putting Isaac and his sister in Adams-Rogers' home, Lula Belle had removed them from a Detroit foster home where Isaac's sister was diagnosed with hepatitis B, a serious liver disease that can be transmitted sexually as well as other ways. Their social worker noted that they were dirty and bruised while living at that home.

Now, they were in a home with young children with serious problems.

### **Neighbors speak up**

Over the years, some of Adams-Rogers' neighbors called Child Protective Services to complain about crying children and yelling and cursing at her house. She admitted that nine complaints against her, including allegations of physical neglect and improper supervision of kids, were investigated, but she said none was substantiated.

She called the claims "trumped-up lies."

Details about the investigations could not be confirmed because protective services records are confidential.

After one investigation, Adams-Rogers wrote letters and had her children put them in neighbors' mailboxes, saying: "When you can open your home and heart, then you can tell me

how many kids I can have in my home."

After that, neighbor Victoria Griffin said, people didn't want to get involved. "People would leave off the porch in the summer because they didn't want to witness anything," she said.

Neighbors said they were troubled because the 12-year-old often seemed to be in charge of Isaac and his sister, even though Adams-Rogers had a live-in caregiver.

One neighbor recalled seeing the girl walking with the kids, Isaac struggling to keep up. The girl yelled and cursed at him, the neighbor said.

Griffin and others noticed the kids were dirty. Once, Griffin saw that Isaac's sister's leg was bleeding.

"I should have said more," she said.

### **Bruises raise suspicions**

On Aug. 4, a little over a month after she took in the Lethbridge kids, Adams-Rogers took Isaac to University Family Physicians on West McNichols in Detroit. He was tugging at his ear, but the doctor noticed something else: bruises on his forehead and back. The doctor called in an associate, Dr. Pierre Morris.

Morris testified in court that he saw multiple bruises in various stages of healing and told Adams-Rogers they looked suspicious. He said she told him Isaac had fallen on a slide at McDonald's during a July 21 visit with his parents, and that another doctor had told her the boy bruised easily.

Morris testified that he planned to report his suspicions of abuse but never reached Child Protective Services by phone. He said he filed the required state form. He wasn't questioned further in court and he did not respond to the Free Press' requests for an interview.

After seeing the doctor on Aug. 4, Adams-Rogers took Isaac to Lula Belle, where she showed the bruises to Karl Troy, his foster-care worker, and said they must have occurred during Isaac's parental visit two weeks earlier. She said she hadn't reported the marks because she thought they'd clear up.

The DHS said Troy noted in Isaac's file that the boy's forehead, cheeks and chin had greenish-blue bruises and his eyes were blackened. But he allowed Isaac to go home with Adams-Rogers. Troy declined to speak with the Free Press. State investigators later faulted him for failing to assess the child's safety or report the injuries to protective services.

The DHS said Troy did not speak with Adams-Rogers again until Aug. 16, when she called to report Isaac's death.

A Lula Belle licensing worker learned of the bruising Aug. 7, but it was two more days before she visited Adams-Rogers' home, where she reported seeing only a light bruise on Isaac's forehead, the DHS said. The department criticized the licensing worker for only interviewing Adams-Rogers.

The state said there was no indication that anyone at Lula Belle ever notified protective services as required. Ken Merritt, an attorney for Lula Belle, disputes that. He said the agency called protective services Aug. 4.

"CPS is the one that's supposed to do something about it," Merritt said.

When Adams-Rogers took Isaac back to Morris on Aug. 14, the doctor said the bruises were healing.

Soon, there would be many more.

### **A mysterious death**

Aug. 16 started out like many other days at Adams-Rogers' home. Deborah Roberts, the live-in caregiver, said she fixed Isaac breakfast around 9:30.

His sister, who had turned 4 just two days earlier, came downstairs about an hour later with Adams-Rogers' 12-year-old daughter, Roberts said. It was hot and, after breakfast, the kids went out to the back porch and played with a stray kitten.

At least nine, and perhaps as many as a dozen, people were in and out of the house that day. Around lunchtime, two of Adams-Rogers' grandchildren stopped by. Another relative came by in the afternoon. Around 1:30, Roberts recalled seeing Adams-Rogers in the den as Roberts headed to her basement bedroom.

Kids were watching televisions upstairs and downstairs, Adams-Rogers said. She recalled that her 12-year-old daughter told her Isaac was napping.

A 16-year-old foster daughter testified that around 3:30 p.m., she came in from the library and headed upstairs to her room. Before long, she heard screaming and ran out to the hallway to find Adams-Rogers' 18-year-old adopted daughter holding Isaac's limp body and screaming for help. The 16-year-old said Adams-Rogers came upstairs, then ran back down and called 911.

According to court records, the 18-year-old told investigators she spotted Isaac lying under a blanket in his bed and thought it was odd on a hot day. When she took off the blanket, she saw he wasn't breathing.

Roberts, the caregiver, testified that Isaac's fingertips were blue, and he had a knot on the right side of his forehead. She said she got a cold towel and put it on his head as the 18-year-old pumped his chest. Roberts searched for a pulse and thought she found one.

When EMS workers arrived, they labored in vain over Isaac for about 25 minutes. He was pronounced dead at Children's Hospital of Michigan shortly after 5 p.m.

Back at the house, Detroit police found seven children in the living room, including a little girl with light-purple bruises on her arms and legs -- presumably Isaac's sister.

"I didn't see any tears from anybody," Officer David Kline said in court.

Protective services workers took the three surviving foster children and Adams-Rogers' two youngest daughters to other foster homes. Adams-Rogers said she turned in her foster-care license; the state moved to cut off her parental rights to her adopted 12- and 1-year-old daughters.

On Jan. 9, Adams-Rogers was charged with involuntary manslaughter for the death of a minor in her custody. She was also charged with two counts of second-degree child abuse.

In court hearings on terminating Adams-Rogers' parental rights, it was revealed that her 12-year-old daughter told investigators she'd been playing with Isaac, tossing him on a mattress, but she missed and he hit the floor. Medical experts testified that it was unlikely the fall could have caused the fatal injuries.

Isaac had brain hemorrhaging, according to an autopsy. His right collarbone was broken. He had second-degree burns on his chest and abdomen and behind one ear. One burn was 4 inches wide. There were old bruises on his lower legs, left arm and left buttock. There were new bruises on his forehead and upper back, and abrasions on his lower back, forehead and eyebrow.

Adams-Rogers maintains that Isaac's death was an accident. As she was arrested, she denied any role in harming him, blaming her 12-year-old daughter. Prosecutors have not ruled out other charges.

Warren Harris, Adams-Rogers' attorney, said his client took Isaac to a doctor because of the bruises and told Lula Belle workers about it.

"We know that a tragic event occurred; a child lost his life," Harris said. "I think that the problem is people automatically attribute that to Mrs. Rogers. ... All I'm saying to the public is, when you have a person who has no history of abuse, who for all intents and purposes is a very good mom, let's not be so quick to judge."

But as she terminated Adams-Rogers' parental rights on Nov. 13, a Wayne County judge noted that Isaac died in a houseful of people, and no one could say they heard a scream.

"Isaac should have been attached to the hip of Ms. Rogers," Family Court Judge Sheila Ann Gibson said. "If something's happening to Isaac, she should have known about it. All the flags were up. All the signs were there."

### Hope for his sister

Isaac almost made it.

A few weeks before his death, a Washtenaw County foster mother who was caring for the ninth and youngest Lethbridge child -- a girl born in April 2006 -- said she could take Isaac and his older sister. But moving the kids would require a change in court jurisdiction from Wayne County.

Officials in the two counties were discussing the change when Isaac was killed. Afterward, Wayne County allowed Washtenaw to take charge of his sister's case, and she was placed with the family there.

When her court-appointed lawyer visited the 4-year-old girl on Aug. 30, she was struck by the child's need for affection. Shirley Anderson-Titus said she rocked the little girl to sleep after she climbed crying on her lap.

Two days later, Isaac's funeral was held in Ann Arbor. It was private, attended by only a few family members and friends.

Isaac was cremated. His parents have his remains.

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## Agency had lengthy list of alarming problems

January 29, 2007

BY RUBY L. BAILEY, JACK KRESNAK and TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

The Lethbridge children's journey did not end with Isaac's brutal death.

A day after Isaac died on Aug. 16, his 4-year-old sister was taken to Children's Hospital, where bruises were found on her back, midsection, spine, thighs and ankles. Shirley Anderson-Titus, the girl's court-appointed attorney, reported later that an examination of suspected sexual abuse was inconclusive.

State investigators combed through the records of the Lula Belle Stewart Center, the Detroit nonprofit agency in charge of Isaac and his sister's care, and found alarming things: 26 of 84 foster homes had expired licenses; at least five allegations of abuse or neglect were never investigated, and seven children were in dangerous or unacceptable placements.

Investigators couldn't immediately locate or verify where 21 of the agency's 106 foster children were, though all were eventually found.

The state took away Lula Belle's license to place foster children, an action the center is fighting.

Critics question whether any of Isaac's three Detroit foster homes were suitable for very young children, or for any foster child.

Elizabeth Carey, executive director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families, which represents private nonprofit agencies, said the state did not provide adequate oversight of Lula Belle.

"It's not that Michigan doesn't know how to deliver good services to kids; it's that we're not delivering the scope of services and intensive services that we used to," Carey said.

James Gale, director of the state Office of Children and Adult Licensing, said he devoted six licensing consultants -- half of his staff -- to the investigation of Lula Belle. Seven Child Protective Services workers also were assigned to the case.

"I had to answer for myself, 'What did we miss?' " said Gale, adding that the investigation proved yearly reviews hadn't indicated significant problems.

But he admitted that the state's policy of sampling a small portion of an agency's records yearly leaves finding widespread problems "the luck of the draw."

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## Tragedy haunts siblings' families

They might've taken Isaac, too

January 29, 2007

BY TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The families who adopted six of the Lethbridge children are deeply disturbed by what happened to Isaac.

Daisy Tomlin of Detroit, who adopted Ashleigh, the oldest, several years after taking her as a foster child, regrets not having been able to take one of her siblings.

"A social worker called me at one point about taking another child from that same family," she said. "Ashleigh was a heavy case, and I didn't want to put anything before her. So I said no."

Besides Ashleigh, who was blind and had multiple medical problems, Tomlin had four adopted boys, who are now 9, 10 and two age 12.

She said she feels bad about saying no.

"Maybe it was Isaac," she said. "But I had my hands full."

The Michigan Department of Human Services tries to keep siblings together. But in a large family such as the Lethbridges, where all nine children were removed from their parents because of neglect, it's tough.

Tomlin, a nurse, and her husband got Ashleigh at age 4. The call came after Ashleigh had been taken to C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor with injuries her parents said occurred in a fall.

"I fell in love with her," Tomlin said. "I gave her a good home. She brought joy to us."

At the Tomlins' home, according to court reports, Ashleigh soon learned to walk. "I had 16 steps that went up to the second floor, and she got so she could go up them," despite her blindness, Tomlin said. "She never fell once."

Ashleigh did well under the Tomlins' care but as she got older, her seizures increased. On Feb. 23, 2006, six months before Isaac's death, Ashleigh died in her sleep of a seizure. She was 12.

Carol Creger, who became a foster parent to two Lethbridge children in the late 1990s and later adopted them, remembered being asked whether she and her husband would take Isaac and his then 3-year-old sister.

Creger, who runs a dog obedience school, doesn't recall the date. The couple thought hard about it.

"We have four kids who are emotionally dependent on us," she said. Taking in more would have made it hard to do justice to all of them. There also wasn't enough room in their three-bedroom Jackson County house.

Looking back, she wondered whether it was the right decision.

Each of the three foster homes Isaac and his sister were placed in had at least five other children, and none had more than three bedrooms. The three-bedroom home Isaac died in had at least nine people living in it.

Creger and her husband are no longer foster parents, but when they were, the workers didn't come to visit the children when they were supposed to. A worker documented visiting them monthly but didn't show up for four months, she said.

"I guess that's what they had to do to survive their job," she said.

There are not enough good foster parents, she said.

"The state is desperate for more," she said.

Contact **TINA LAM** at 313-222-6421 or [tlam@freepress.com](mailto:tlam@freepress.com).

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Article published Jan 29, 2007

## **Baby injured; mother arrested**

RAISINVILLE TOWNSHIP - A 7-month-old baby suffered a skull fracture and his mother was arrested during the weekend on child abuse charges.

The baby remains hospitalized, but is alert and conscious, said Monroe County sheriff's Detective Dave Davison. He categorized the baby's condition as stable.

On Saturday, the child's 22-year-old mother arrived at police headquarters for an interview and was arrested afterward.

The woman, who remains lodged in the county jail, was to be arraigned today in First District Court on first-degree child abuse charges.

On Thursday night, the mother and a relative took the child to the Dundee Urgent Care Center for a bump on the baby's head. X-rays showed the child suffered a skull fracture and hematoma, or internal bleeding, on the right side of his head.

The baby was transferred to C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor and the Department of Human Services was notified. Officials there then contacted the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, which conducted the investigation.

Detective Davison said the baby's mother also has a 3-year-old girl. Officials have begun the process of placing the children with relatives.

The woman and her children live on Ida-Maybee Rd. with her boyfriend and his family.

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## KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

### Judge ends McNeely's parental rights

Saturday, January 27, 2007

By Lynn Turner

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The Rev. Jerry McNeely's parental rights to two sons, 14 and 16, were terminated following a hearing earlier this month with visiting Judge Michael Skinner of Eaton County probate court.

The boys, whose names are not being printed in the Kalamazoo Gazette because they are juveniles, are wards of the court and are expected to remain in foster care.

McNeely said he will appeal the judge's ruling, which stemmed from charges of abuse and neglect.

Police were called to McNeely's home when he lived on Bruce Street several times in 2005 on reports that at least one of the boys was locked out of the house. McNeely said the boys ran away from home and disobeyed his rules.

The boys were removed from McNeely's custody in 2005.

McNeely took things too far by locking the boys out of the house and making them stay with relatives, "a lot of things that were extremely poor parenting," Skinner said. "That's way beyond strict. That's not only neglect. I think it rises to the level of abuse."

Although McNeely said he didn't want contact with his sons until they "repented" their transgressions, "Rev. McNeely hasn't taken responsibility for his actions," Skinner said. "He pushed this all on the kids. He blames the children. He blames the other parties in this case. He blames the whole system. Everybody is against him. Everybody has done something wrong except him. That's ridiculous. This is his fault. He placed the children into this situation. He doesn't have a clue how to be a parent."

The attorney representing the two boys told Skinner during the hearing they didn't want to go back to McNeely. They had been adopted by him after their biological parents' rights had been terminated, according to Nancy Skocelas, the prosecutor in the case.

"He says, 'I sometimes think I don't want his rights terminated, but then I remember what it was like at his house, and I don't want to go back to that,'" attorney Jeffrey Getting said of the younger son.

The former president of the Metropolitan Kalamazoo Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and former pastor of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Kalamazoo failed to provide a valid psychological examination to the court, which could have been the start of an effort to keep the family together, Skinner said.

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Published January 28, 2007

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## Dimondale elementary teacher loses job

By WILL KANGAS  
Editor

HOLT— A nine-year teaching veteran has been placed on a leave of absence and will not return to Holt Public Schools, officials said.

Tom Haddock, who was teaching at Dimondale elementary this year and has been with the district for seven years, will not be returning to teach or be employed in any capacity, according to Scott Szpara, assistant district superintendent of human resources.

Szpara said an internal investigation started after some foreign exchange students complained of Haddock's behavior at his home in November. Haddock had been hosting foreign exchange students who attended Holt High School.

The investigation led to Haddock's suspension, Szpara said. The investigation ended Jan. 10. "We have determined Haddock will not be teaching in our district," Holt Public Schools Superintendent Tom Davis said. "But I want parents to know all of the investigation stemmed from activities away from Dimondale elementary."

"Nothing occurred on school property," Davis said. "And the investigation concerned high school age students."

The district's investigation resulted in issuing a complaint that was submitted to Child Protective Services, Szpara said. In this case, he said, the incident resulted in what is defined by the state as child abuse and neglect.

"When that is the case," Szpara said. "We are obligated to report it and when complete, turn it over to their office."

Neither Davis nor Szpara would comment on the investigation specifics, and declined to say what went wrong. Haddock could not be reached for comment.

Officials at the Child Protective Services agency would not comment on the complaint. An employee said all protective service investigations are not public during the investigation.

No criminal charges have been filed, according to the Eaton County Sheriff's Department.

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Article published Jan 28, 2007

## **Bill offers more protection against school bullying**

Children would have greater protection against bullying and harassment at school Under bipartisan legislation introduced last week by state Sen. Glenn Anderson, D-Westland.

Named "Matt's Safe School Law," the bill uniformly defines bullying and harassment and requires that all schools adopt a policy that clearly outlines the consequences of such behavior.

"Every parent's greatest fear is that their child might be mistreated when they can't be there to keep them safe," said Anderson. "This legislation will strengthen the law protecting children in the classroom and the chat rooms."

Anderson introduced similar legislation last year as a state representative, but the new version of Matt's Safe School Law extends protections to Internet activity.

The bill now includes a provision that protects children against bullying that takes place with the use of the Internet on school grounds or with remote Internet access provided by a school.

A study by I-Safe America, a group that supports Web safety for children, found that 42 percent of kids have reported being bullied on the Internet. And, according to Anderson, video also was recently posted on the Web site YouTube of teenage girls beating a classmate highlights the extent to which the Internet is being misused to intimidate children.

He went on to say that the consequences of bullying are far-reaching. Bullying is a serious threat to school safety for both students and teachers and has been linked to higher levels of dropout rates, crime, suicide, and school shootings.

Research in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests that one out of every three students in grades 6 through 10 have been involved in a bullying incident, he said.

This legislation is named in honor of Matt Epling, a 14-year-old student at MacDonald Middle School in East Lansing who had been the victim of abuse and took his own life believing no one would stop the torment he was enduring. Matt's family was actively involved in crafting this legislation to create a safer environment for young people.

Anderson's legislation has the support of the Gov. Jennifer Granholm, and groups like the Michigan Board of Education, Michigan Education Association, Michigan Association of School Psychologists and Fight Crime -- Invest in Kids.

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## Man Tasers wife's grandmother in spanking dispute

VANCOUVER, Wash. A man who zapped his wife's grandmother with a Taser tells a Washington newspaper that if he had it to do over again he wouldn't have used it.

Aaron de Bruyn (duh-BROON') was arrested after a dispute earlier this week over how to discipline his seven-month-old son.

He gave the baby a swat on his diapered rear-end to stop him from grabbing electrical wires. The wife's grandmother, who was visiting, called that child abuse and said she'd have the child taken away.

That's when de Bruyn told her to leave the house. When she refused, he got out the Taser and gave her a 60-second countdown and then used the stun gun on her right shoulder.

Police say the grandmother was not injured. De Bruyn was arrested and spent a night in jail.

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# Taxpayers deserve Nate inquiry

Web-posted Jan 27, 2007

## OAKLAND PRESS EDITORIAL

When killer Nathaniel Abraham walked out of an Oakland County courtroom a free man last week, Michigan residents wanted to know two things: Why did he put on the sartorial display he sported, and why were they going to pay for his housing, college education and other assistance?

Now, taxpayers deserve to know who promised what services to Abraham, what help he will be provided by the state and who may have backed off earlier commitments of assistance after the public furor over the possibility of such help.

The Legislature should appoint a panel to investigate whether state bureaucrats promised taxpayer-funded support for the newly released Abraham and then backed off from the commitment in the face of public outrage.

Oakland Prosecutor David Gorcyca and Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley say the state is lying and now backing off on assistance it said it would provide for Abraham. Carley said she was at a meeting during which state officials said Michigan taxpayers would fund two years of housing for Abraham and pay for his college education until he turns 25.

State officials deny any postrehabilitation assistance was settled.

If the state claim is true, residents have to ask why the 21-year-old killer of Ronnie Green Jr. was allowed to go free if such plans were not final. State officials had 10 years to create postincarceration assistance for Abraham, who has been in custody since he was 11.

Abraham's attorney, Daniel Bagdade, said state officials promised postrehabilitation financial support for Abraham. Now, Bagdade said, the state is backpedaling from its earlier commitment. While he said he was uncertain of exactly what services the state pledged to provide, Bagdade said Abraham was informed Jan. 23 that the assistance might not be provided. He said Abraham was upset that officials were "going back on their word." The attorney now says he cannot get a straight answer from state officials.

This is no longer an issue of whether Abraham needs or is entitled to taxpayer-funded assistance.

Most people, particularly taxpayers, would conclude that Abraham doesn't deserve any more state welfare." If 10 years of care, counseling and tutoring at a cost of \$1 million haven't rehabilitated the young man, it's doubtful any more money will. Most individuals

of his age are self-sufficient enough to live respectable, crime-free lives and contribute to society.

The lingering questions now are: Would he have received this support if there had not been a public outcry, and if so, why are state officials now allegedly changing their tune?

Abraham deserves to know, but so do the taxpayers, who would have been footing the bill for those services and perhaps are footing the bill for other released convicts.

The House or Senate should establish a panel to investigate the issues surrounding what was promised Abraham and by whom, and then release those findings publicly.

In the meantime, Abraham was given his break when he was sent to a juvenile facility instead of prison 10 years ago. It's up to him to prove he has learned his lesson.

January 27, 2007

Editorial Quick Hits:

## **Invest in Nathaniel Abraham now**

The Detroit News

The Oakland County attorneys who have raised a stink about the possible state investment in rent and college education in Nathaniel Abraham's new post-prison life are short-sighted and wrong. Abraham faces every imaginable obstacle to becoming a working, socially responsible adult. He's a kid who was raised by prison guards since he was 11. He has little education or skill base. At 21, he's a well-known convicted felon who will scare employers. Helping Abraham successfully transition to adult life is in the public's best interest. Better to invest in him now, when he has the best chance to develop a new life, than to pay more than \$32,000 a year for him back in prison.

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# Open Juvenile Courts To The Public

## Daily Campus Editorial Board

**Posted: 1/29/07**

Recently, there has been strong pressure put on Connecticut's legislature to make the juvenile court system open to the public. Currently, only the adult court system is freely open to the public and the press, while the juvenile court system is closed to both and court records are not publicly available. This needs to change in order to better improve the flow of information and the public awareness of the juvenile court system.

There is a growing trend across in the country to open the juvenile court system to the public. The main factor influencing this trend is the accountability of the court system. Horror stories abound of children being taken from their homes or not being granted speedy resolutions to their legal problems. The state Department of Children and Families, as well as the juvenile court system, has routinely been opposed to opening the courts to protect the rights and privacy of the children involved. While this is a legitimate concern, children's rights can still be respected with a more open court system.

Locally, New York and New Hampshire, along with 19 other states, have passed laws to open their juvenile court systems. This can be done with special provisions to protect children. Simple changes like making court transcripts publicly available with the names of the children changed will provide the desired insight into the court system. Furthermore, juvenile court judges should have the discretion, as is done in the adult court system, to close the court proceedings to the public in the event of special circumstances.

It is important to open the juvenile court system to ensure the accountability of all the participants involved and protect the safety of our children. When children are suffering as a result of bureaucratic nonsense or are being bounced from foster home to foster home, the public has a right to know. Both the juvenile court system and the state Department of Children and Families are funded by citizens' tax dollars, and should therefore be open to public scrutiny. The checks and balances provided by public knowledge will work well to improve the court system and reduce the number of unfortunate events that happen behind the closed doors of the court room. Opening the courts with the simple omissions of the involved children's names will provide the necessary view into the juvenile courts that the public desires.

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January 27, 2007

## Offering Help for Former Foster Care Youths

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)  
The New York Times

DETROIT — When current and former foster children formed a group to help youths who had turned 18 and were “aging out” of the system, one of the first things they did was hold a luggage drive.

“We saw that a lot of the kids were taking their clothes out in garbage bags,” said Chilton Brown, 23, a former foster child who spent ages 3 to 18 as a ward of the state, bouncing around 15 family homes or group residences.

A life contained in green plastic bags: it is the kind of humiliating detail that hits home hardest among foster youths themselves. It is also a telling sign of how unprepared many of these 18-year-olds are to live on their own, without families, jobs or school diplomas to shore them up.

In part because of the increasing advocacy by foster youth groups like Mr. Brown’s, many states are expanding efforts to help young adults prepare for life outside the system, offering transitional housing, education, medical care and mentoring as they step out on their own. States are also extending aid for extra years, in some cases to age 21 or even beyond.

“We’re finally seeing a recognition by public agencies that they have a responsibility to this population beyond the age of 18,” said Gary Stangler, director of Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a foundation in St. Louis that is helping to organize foster youth boards and offers matched savings accounts as well as job aid in 10 states. “In our society, most 18-year-old kids aren’t ready to be thrust into the world.”

Long in the shadows, the plight of aging out foster youths — some 24,000 a year nationwide who fail to be adopted and usually leave court-monitored care at 18 — is gaining new attention, as youths speak out and research reveals the numbers who end up in homeless shelters, jail and long-term poverty.

California, spurred by the lobbying of the country's largest and most powerful group of former foster children, the California Youth Connection, plans to provide 1,200 transitional housing units, and support counseling, for young adults emerging from care.

In New York City, as part of a wider effort to fight homelessness, the state and city are creating 200 apartments for foster care veterans with special needs. Several private agencies are expanding their programs, as well.

Washington and Iowa have recently joined at least 17 other states, including New York, that allow youths under some circumstances to remain in foster care until age 21. The move keeps the youths under the protection of a court that can press for aid to which they may be entitled into their twenties but is not always offered by overwhelmed state agencies.

But a universal option to remain in foster care until age 21, which is supported by the [American Bar Association](#) and many experts, has been hampered by a lack of money. The large federal subsidies that help pay for the system's courts, lawyers and social workers are provided only up to the age of 18, or 19 for those finishing high school. In Illinois, where nearly half of foster children now stay to 21, the extra years are paid for by the state. Early studies by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the [University of Chicago](#) indicate that those who remain are faring better than those who leave at 18.

But it is too soon, scholars say, to know how much difference all the new efforts will make in the lives of children who have suffered abuse or neglect and separations from their families.

In Michigan, nearly 500 youths age out annually, usually at 18. A study of 264 former foster children, released in October by psychologists at Wayne State University, showed how poorly many had fared.

Youths from Detroit and two surrounding counties who aged out in 2002 and 2003, mainly African-American, were surveyed three and a half years after they left care. Seventeen percent had stayed in the streets or in shelters for an average of two months each. Some 33 percent had spend long periods "couch surfing" with friends or relatives.

Four in ten were high school graduates. The average youth had been unemployed half the time since leaving care; most jobs were in fast food, averaging just \$600 per month. More than one in four males had spent time in jail.

Under a 1999 federal law that provides some “independent living” assistance to age 21, many aged-out youths can get financial aid, including up to \$1,000 to help rent an apartment and up to \$5,000 a year for those enrolled in college or training schools.

“If it weren’t for these programs, I’d probably be in a shelter and I’d have to drop out of school,” said Stacey Kline, 21, who left Detroit’s foster system at 18. Ms. Kline has been an active leader in the city’s youth boards and is now in college, hoping to someday run a home for aged-out youths.

Still, for Ms. Kline it has been two steps forward, one step back: she recently borrowed emergency money from the Jim Casey program to help her rent a new apartment after, she said, an angry ex-boyfriend vandalized her previous apartment.

In other common patterns, many youths are eager to sever ties with the child welfare bureaucracy, some squander their limited aid and others are in no shape to take advantage of these benefits.

Michael Morris, 21, says he regrets forfeiting his transitional aid. Born to teenage drug users, he was in foster care in Detroit from the age of six months, drifting through dozens of private and group homes.

Though he had never even met his parents, Mr. Morris said, “I wanted a family and I wanted to be with my parents no matter whether they were on drugs.” Before he turned 18 and exited foster care, he met his sister and mother for the first time and decided to move in with his mother without the consent of the court, thus losing transitional rent and school subsidies.

He later joined one of the emerging foster youth boards in Detroit and received some matching money for what he saved while working as a security guard.

But living with his mother did not last long. Mr. Morris then tried sharing apartments, but the roommates did not pay their share of the rent. He became unemployed and recently

arrived at the crisis center of Covenant House in Detroit, where he shared a barren room with two other homeless youths.

“I hope to be out by March,” Mr. Morris said. “I got a good lead on a job at Popeye’s,” he added, which would pay \$7.25 an hour. Through the matched savings program, he hopes to rent his own apartment and enroll in community college.

The growing advocacy by foster children themselves has done more than anything else to draw the attention of state and national officials, said Robin Nixon, director of the National Foster Care Coalition.

In Michigan, Marianne Udow, director of human services, said one of her first acts after taking office in January 2004 was to meet with youth boards to ask for advice.

“I left that meeting feeling that the whole system was broken,” Ms. Udow said. The youth boards later issued 15 recommendations for improving the system and lobbied the governor and legislators. Some suggestions were accepted, including making sure that all foster children get a certified copy of their birth certificate and a Social Security card and help obtaining driver’s licenses.

Other suggestions would be more costly and remain under discussion, including offering free college tuition, giving former foster children cars being auctioned by the state and giving all the option to remain in care to 21.

But the youths also made it clear they believed that the problems start when the state removes children from their parents — sometimes too readily — and moves them away from relatives, friends and familiar schools.

Their first recommendation was that foster youths should have a say whenever changes in their status were considered. Their second was to provide them help maintaining ties with their birth families and hometown friends.

The state created a task force with youths on every panel. One top recommendation, the automatic extension of Medicaid coverage to age 21, has just been put into effect. The State Housing Development Authority has also allocated \$3 million for rent subsidies, whose recipients will also be eligible for regular mental health and other services.



At the same time, Ms. Udow said, the state is working to reduce the frequency with which children are removed from their parents and trying to keep more children with relatives and in the same schools. The state is in settlement talks with the advocacy group Children's Rights, which brought a suit accusing Michigan of providing inadequate protection and support to children in its care.

For the hundreds who have joined, the youth boards, with their weekly meetings and election of officers, have offered personal breakthroughs as much as a way to influence policy.

"When we come together it's like family," said Alice Harris, a 22-year-old mother of three children who lived in a home for unwed mothers when she entered foster care, then ran away at 16 and survived on the streets for more than a year.

More recently Ms. Harris has lived with a boyfriend, received welfare and become certified as a nurse's assistant. She has become heavily involved with her local youth board in central Detroit, getting elected as an officer and lobbying in the state capital.

When she attended her first board meeting two years ago, she said, "I didn't want to leave."

"We were just gossiping, and I made friends, some of them worse off than I was."

Chilton Brown, who says he "acted out" during his 15 years in foster care, has benefited from the new aid programs in Michigan but also illustrates how hard it can be to turn things around.

Mr. Brown gained confidence as a public spokesman, especially for the special challenges facing gay youths like himself, and has worked as a trainer of new foster parents. He entered Wayne State University with financial aid and aspirations to become a social worker. He took advantage of the matched savings program to buy a car.

But he has also lost a series of jobs, could not keep up payments on his car, lost his home when a relative moved away and has missed the last two semesters of college. He has spent the last three months living in Covenant House.

“I got too adapted to having other people take care of me,” he said in the sparse double room he shares. Now Mr. Brown’s belongings are stuffed into one suitcase, and two large plastic shopping bags.



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Published January 28, 2007

## State seeks volunteers for foster care board

LANSING — The State Court Administrative Office of the Michigan Supreme Court is seeking volunteers to serve on the Eaton County Foster Care Review Board.

The Michigan Legislature established the citizen's Foster Care Review Board Program in 1984 in an effort to improve children's foster care programs throughout the state.

The five-to seven-member boards meet one day each month to review a representative sample of cases of children who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care due to abuse or neglect.

At these reviews, board members interview parents, foster parents, caseworkers, attorneys, and other interested parties who may be involved in planning for the ward.

Advisory recommendations are formulated and mailed to the court, child welfare agency, prosecuting attorney, parents, and other interested parties.

The purpose of the review is to ensure that all involved agencies, including the court, have established a permanency plan for the ward; that progress is being made toward achieving permanency; and that the children are being well cared for while in the foster care system.

The Foster Care Review Boards are comprised of citizens who represent a broad cross-section of their communities. The program is seeking volunteers who have demonstrated leadership in other settings.

Minorities and men are especially encouraged to apply. Employees of the Department of Human Services, family courts, or private child placement agencies are prohibited by law from serving on Foster Care Review Boards.

Each volunteer who is selected must attend a two-day orientation training for new volunteers in Lansing on April 19-20. This training is a requirement to serve on a board.

All board members subsequently attend a annual two-day training conference, which is held in early November. Expenses for these training's are reimbursed.

The Eaton County Foster Care Review Board is part of a multi-county board in the mid-Michigan area. Members of multi-county boards would be required to travel to two different locations for board reviews.

Citizens interested in becoming a board member for the Foster Care Review Board should call (517) 373-1956 for an application.

The deadline for receiving applications is Jan. 31, and interviews with prospective candidates will

take place in January and early February 2007.

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January 29, 2007

**Paul W. Smith**

## Bush health plan may get Big 3 nod



O utta' my mind on a Monday moanin':

Health and Human Services Secretary Michael O. Leavitt will be the headliner at the Detroit Economic Club luncheon to (hopefully) help us better understand President Bush's "Value-Driven Healthcare Initiative." Scheduled to attend and "sign on" to the plan are General Motors Chief Executive Rick Wagoner, Chrysler Chief Executive Tom LaSorda and Ford Motor Chairman Bill Ford. This appears to be a positive follow through from Bush on some of the issues presented at the White House not so long ago by the auto guys.

Many people are (rightfully) concerned anytime anyone says, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help" But there appear to be some good points and clearly positive stated goals.

If a company ever needed an optimistic, enthusiastic, talented leader, it is our Ford. Many of us think they will (and pray they do) climb out of the abyss. Chief Executive Alan Mulally is doing all of this without a net. He gets one chance.

As we see (seemingly) record numbers of foreclosures and worry about the decreasing value of our biggest investment, we are reminded once again how "they" certainly live a different life than most of us could ever even imagine.

We see the story of real estate baron Tim Blixseth planning to build the world's most expensive home. The 53,000-square-foot stone and wood mega-mansion will be built at the Yellowstone Club, a members-only, residential ski and golf resort near Bozeman, Mont. Ten bedrooms, 160 acres, a private gondola-like chairlift that will carry the home owner, friends and family to the club's private ski slopes when you tire of the home's indoor/outdoor pool and movie theater.

It is all yours, assuming there is no bidding war, for \$155 million -- for a single family home.

I've been hearing a lot of good word of mouth for Will Smith's "The Pursuit of Happyness" (you, too?). Maybe it's because we all could really use a "feel good" movie right about now.

It's been a tough start of this New Year. I called old friend Nick Calanni to check on mentor/friend/colleague Hal Youngblood (the producer/writer/performer), only to find that Hal had lost his long tough battle with multiple myeloma just hours before my call. You were touched by Hal's creativity and talent if you ever listened to the late, great J.P. McCarthy; enjoyed his work at a variety of theatres, such as the Attic, Bonstelle, Willoway and Jewish Ensemble theaters; or maybe even taken one of his creative writing courses at Wayne State University.

Hal's life ended where it began, in Johnson City, Tenn., 77 years later. All of us touched by Hal's magic are sad, but thankful to have been lucky enough to have much of his life and talent "focused" on Detroit.

*Paul W. Smith is host of "The Paul W. Smith Show" on WJR (760 AM) from 5:30-9 a.m. Monday-Friday. His column appears Monday in The News. Please e-mail comments to [letters@detnews.com](mailto:letters@detnews.com).*

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## Treat health-care ills with state-tried cures

The right mix of ideas could get all Americans covered

January 28, 2007

Now that President George W. Bush has opened the door to health-care reform, Congress should meet him with proposals that would bring realistic hope to Americans who worry whether they can afford a serious illness. Meaningful changes now could move the country toward a more universal system, instead of leaving millions of people at risk.

Bush this week pledged support and incentives for states with creative plans, such as one in the works in Michigan, to cover more people. Forty-seven million people lack health insurance, with still more inadequately covered. Instead of merely rewarding states that are taking the lead, Washington should grab the best parts of each plan. The states' ideas prove that the demand exists and that solutions are at hand.

For starters, states are creating better insurance pools, so more individuals and small businesses can get access to the insurance discounts that big employers negotiate. Creating bigger pools is a logical federal strategy -- and needs to happen before requiring everyone to have insurance, as Massachusetts does.

In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to pair a similar requirement with a rule that insurance companies must cover anyone, meaning people couldn't be refused because of pre-existing conditions. That makes huge sense. People who have no insurance but have an illness that could be more efficiently managed with insurance can't get insurance because of that illness. It's hard to require them to buy coverage, then, no?

Another improvement would be for Congress to pass Dearborn Democrat John Dingell's bill to allow the federal government to negotiate lower drug prices for the Medicare prescription drug program. The Congressional Budget Office has warned this might not create huge savings, but it's silly to leave the secretary of Health and Human Services bereft of that power.

Taking over responsibility for catastrophic expenses from employers -- one of the best ideas from U.S. Sen. John Kerry's failed presidential bid -- would also help businesses, such as Michigan's manufacturers, that are being crippled by health insurance costs.

And as Hillary Clinton suggests, the federal program that gives children health insurance should be expanded -- initially by raising the embarrassingly low threshold that the federal government uses to define "poverty."

Finally, the Massachusetts and Michigan plans rely partly on the federal government to grant exceptions to the Medicaid program, which is administered by the states to provide health services to the poor. If states have better ways to use the money, why not rework the program to reflect that instead of regularly carving out special deals?

All of these ideas, of course, nibble at the edges. Fundamentally, this nation has to devise a health care structure that gives everyone coverage of some reasonable quality so that they can and will go to doctors when they need to, engage in preventive care and catch problems when they are treatable -- and less costly.

The states have gotten the ball rolling. Congress and the president need to pick it up and run it past the goal line.



## Bush health plan

President's proposal timid, but use it as a start

### FLINT

#### THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, January 28, 2007

President Bush's health care proposal would help millions of Americans buy coverage, but does little for the nearly 47 million uninsured.

His plan also is silent in two areas that have huge potential for cutting costs: administrative overhead and the need to encourage the public into healthier habits to reduce chronic and catastrophic illnesses, both of which hike the nation's health tab enormously.

But the president's plan put forth in last week's State of the Union speech has advanced the debate over the nation's expensive, yet flawed, health system that should do more than provide talking points for presidential hopefuls.

On the plus side, Bush's plan, which employs tax incentives to help individuals and families purchase coverage, would reduce the number of uninsured, albeit by only a few million. It also would eliminate an inequity - benefiting many in Michigan - that leaves employer-provided plans untaxed, while people buying their own coverage do so with after-tax dollars.

Bush's plan to offer tax deductions for all insured would be a boon to the latter group, and also those with employer-provided benefits valued at less than \$7,500 for an individual or \$15,000 for families. But those with more generous plans would pay more taxes, which has groups such as the UAW wary; they note companies might be tempted to cut benefits.

Nevertheless, a debate over how to expand health coverage and curb costs demands discussion of every part of our \$2.2-trillion health system, as well as Bush's inadequate proposal.

Its biggest fault is the aforementioned failure to help most of the uninsured, especially the poorest. Even assuming they could afford coverage, a tax deduction isn't much incentive for those with small incomes. A tax credit would be fairer as this would reimburse the poor and well-off equally.

Another weakness of the Bush plan is the absence of key measures to control expenses, especially in the non-medical area. Typically, a doctor's office employs one or two people just to handle insurance payments. The cost of this and other administration of the health system may eat up 30 percent of the dollars.

Chronic conditions, like diabetes and heart disease, also burden the system, and some of this could be ameliorated by plans promoting better lifestyles and regular checkups. Government, which pays the largest share of the health tab, must encourage this trend.

Credit Bush for at least offering a health plan of limited help, especially for those buying coverage. But it misses too many people and means higher taxes for those with the best coverage - including 1.2 million in Michigan.

Even ignoring local concerns, the president's proposal is a timid effort whose main worth will be to focus more of Washington's attention on the health care issue. So let the Bush plan be a start, not an end, of the discussion.

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## Financial News

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Source: Michigan 4C Association

# Child-Care Organization Praises Michigan Regulation Requiring Immunization Against Invasive Pneumococcal Disease

Thursday January 25, 9:10 am ET

LANSING, Mich., Jan. 25 /PRNewswire/ -- The Michigan Department of Community Health has further strengthened its commitment to children's health with a new requirement that all children attending licensed day care facilities receive the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, Prevnar®, a vaccine that helps provide protection against invasive pneumococcal disease, a major cause of morbidity and mortality among infants and young children.

"Invasive pneumococcal disease is a serious threat to our children, but we can help prevent it and protect our children's health with timely immunizations," said Mark Sullivan, Michigan 4C Association Executive Director. "The Michigan 4C Association is proud to support Michigan in helping ensure that children are protected from this life-threatening, yet vaccine-preventable disease."

All children enrolled in child-care facilities in the State of Michigan must now receive the completed series of the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, which is already part of the childhood immunization schedule recommended by the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Prevnar is administered in a 4-dose series (given at 2, 4, 6 and 12-15 months). For previously-unvaccinated older infants and children, there is a catch-up schedule available.

Invasive pneumococcal diseases are a group of potentially life-threatening infections caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, and include bacterial meningitis, bacteremia, sepsis and bacteremic pneumonia. Before Prevnar® was available in the United States, *S. pneumoniae* was estimated to be responsible for 25 percent to 40 percent of the cases of bacterial meningitis among children. Additionally, *S. pneumoniae* can cause non-invasive illnesses, such as otitis media and pneumonia.

"Successful vaccination programs are the best method available for helping decrease the burden of childhood infectious diseases," Mr. Sullivan added. "The Michigan 4C Association is committed to providing Michigan's children with the healthiest start by supporting initiatives such as this immunization requirement."

### About the Michigan 4C Association

The Michigan 4C Association promotes and advocates for the optimal care and development of Michigan's children and families through the statewide Community Coordinated Child Care (4C) Network. The Michigan 4C Association provides a statewide focus to support the work of the regional 4C offices by conducting research, coordinating services and managing business, foundation and government contracts.

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 Source: Michigan 4C Association

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## **Dismissed Case Doesn't Mean Destroyed Records**

**MIRS, January 26, 2007**

A person who has their domestic violence case dismissed doesn't automatically get to have those records destroyed, according to a recently released Court of Appeals decision.

In *Marvin Earl MCELROY vs. Michigan State Police Criminal Justice Information Center*, case no. 263077, McElroy took the state to court after he was released from prison after serving time for a domestic abuse charge.

McElroy entered a plea of no contest under the agreement that if the court accepted his plea, it would dismiss the charge after he finished probation and completed a domestic violence class.

The judge didn't accept the plea agreement, but was clear in his intentions to follow out the conditions of the plea agreement.

After McElroy met all of the conditions listed under the plea agreement, he asked the Criminal Justice Center to destroy or give back documents of his domestic violence charge. Elroy argued that the documents should be destroyed because the charges that were initially brought against him were dismissed and he'd completed the class.

The trial court agreed that McElroy's documents should be destroyed. However, the Court of Appeals reversed the trial court's decision, stating that McElroy had to prove he was not guilty rather than just complete the classes, to have the documents destroyed.

Appellate judges Henry William SAAD, Mark CAVANAGH and Bill SCHUETTE signed the decision.

## Black women seek protection closer to home

**By Marie Tessier**

Special to the NNPA from Womensenews

(WOMENSENEWS) — Activists in the growing movement to support battered African American women say they agree on what's needed to stem domestic violence: more services that are culturally informed and integrated into victims' communities to help them overcome barriers to seeking help.

"Color-blindness is not what you need if you're trying to serve diverse communities," says Oliver Williams, executive director of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African-American Community at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "The trend is toward an increase in community-based, faith-based and grassroots services."

While the battered women's movement has long strived to serve all women, few projects can identify specific programs designed to reach out to diverse communities, Williams and others say. That can be a barrier to safety for Black women, who tend to reach out for help through informal networks in their communities, such as a church, rather than consulting a shelter or hotline, Williams and other scholars and activists say.

African American women face a higher risk for experiencing domestic violence than other women, according to the most recent data from the Justice Department. In fact, they are more than twice as likely to die at the hands of a spouse or a boyfriend. They are also at greater risk of more severe violence, according to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in Washington, D.C.

"When you're talking about African American women, you're talking about everything bad about family violence, and then some," says Tonya Lovelace, executive director of the Women of Color Network, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence based in Harrisburg, Pa. "The way that communities of color experience violence is affected by our history, and by other issues."

Research on domestic violence and African Americans is sparse, scholars and activists say. While some trends are generally accepted, it remains an open question how much race factors into higher rates of violence, scholars say. Much of the difference may simply reflect African Americans' disproportionate representation in lower-income groups.

Some behaviors can be grouped by race, but differences can be deceiving, Williams says. "Black women are more likely to leave than other women, but they are also more likely to return," he says. "A lot of the reasons may speak more to poverty and a lack of resources, because a woman may just not have a different place to go."

That's why many domestic violence agencies are increasing efforts to work with a wider variety of service providers in communities of color, advocates say.

Organizations such as Atlanta's Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute, Williams' institute at the University of Minnesota and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence's Women of Color Network in Harrisburg, Pa., are all engaged in training domestic violence groups and community service agencies in each others' work.

Much of the funding comes through the federal Violence Against Women Act, and much of the activity is coordinated and supported by the Violence Against Women Office at the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. National groups such as the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C., and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence coordinate and facilitate the work.

While scholars and activists agree that higher rates of poverty among African Americans probably shape some statistics about violence, they are uniformly quick to point out that higher incomes do not immunize against domestic violence.

An October 2006 article in Essence magazine, for example, details how Prince George's County, Md., the wealthiest predominantly Black county in the nation, has a high rate of intimate partner homicide. According to the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, 48 people, mostly women, died there between 2001 and 2006 as a result of domestic violence, second only to Baltimore County, which had 72 deaths.

One of the starkest realities for African American women is their vulnerability to homicide. And the risk of violence is higher for women in bigger cities, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice

Statistics.

Homicide is the second leading cause of death for Black women between the ages of 15 and 24, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Only young Black men have a higher homicide rate, and only Black men have a higher rate of intimate partner homicide than Black women, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Barriers to seeking help are believed to contribute to the higher rate of homicide for both women and men because violence has escalated to a greater degree before a woman can reach safety, scholars and activists generally agree. The homicide rate for Black men has dropped more than for Black women in recent decades, according to federal statistics.

All the factors that contribute to greater violence probably explain the higher intimate partner homicide rate of Black men, Lovelace says. "Black women get arrested more, we get convicted more, and we have had fewer places to go. The statistics don't account for self-defense."

One of the biggest roadblocks to safety, says Tricia Bent-Goodley, a professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., is the troubled, violent histories many Black communities have with the police and social service agencies. That provides one more cultural barrier to seeking police intervention, even though African American women report intimate partner violence to the police more often--in 66.4 percent of incidents--than other women.

In addition, Black women face a greater likelihood of being arrested along with a perpetrator, and their children are more likely to end up in foster care when authorities are involved, Bent-Goodley said in a training Webcast last year.

"If I'm being battered, the decision to pick up the phone to call for help is different for me," says Lovelace. "There are more Black men incarcerated than there are in college, so that makes it a bigger burden, and I have to question whether he will be brutalized."



## Ford closing child-care centers

January 26, 2007

By SARAH A. WEBSTER

FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

As part of its cost cutting, Ford Motor Co. is closing seven day care centers in Michigan, Kentucky and Missouri that provide care for nearly 900 pre-schoolers and infants, a company official confirmed Friday.

The facilities, which are jointly supported by Ford and the UAW, will be closed by the end of June, Ford spokesman Tom Hoyt confirmed. They also offer kindergarten classes.

He refused to discuss the costs associated with running the facilities, but said the decision to shutter the centers because of the company's "business realities and the current restructuring initiatives."

On Thursday, Ford posted an annual loss of \$12.7 billion, the biggest annual loss in the company's 103-year history and the second-largest ever among domestic automakers.

Both Ford and UAW leaders agreed to close the centers, but parents were not involved in the decision. Parents were slated to be notified Friday afternoon, although some found out ahead of schedule and called the Free Press.

Hoyt said that Ford has 29 "Family Service and Learning Centers" nationwide. But only seven offer childcare services.

"The childcare is what's being discontinued," Hoyt said.

The centers, which also offer educational and fitness classes, will remain open to workers.

Elizabeth Drotar, a salaried worker at Ford and a mother in her 30s, breastfeeds her infant during breaks at work at a center in Dearborn that is closing. She said the news was devastating.

Drotar's husband also works at Ford, and she said her family feels Ford's financial pain acutely these days. One of the reasons she decided not to take a company buyout was because she didn't think she'd find another daycare center that was as good.

"I understand the financial troubles, but they didn't even see if there was anything they could do to cut costs," she said in a telephone interview Friday.

"I'd be willing to pay more, but they didn't even approach us. ... There are going to be a lot of parents who are very upset."

The center she uses cares for more than 100 children on Rotunda Drive, between the Southfield and Oakwood. It's a free-standing building that was constructed for use as a daycare. It is managed by Bright Horizon Family Solutions, a Watertown, Mass. company that operates day care centers.

Ford has been named 10 times, including last year, to the Working Mother Magazine 100 Best Companies list, which recognizes companies for their family-friendly policies. The child-care centers were one of the reasons cited for the recognition.

The centers closing are

- Michigan
- Pestillo Center - Ypsilanti
- Yokich Center - Sterling Heights
- Livonia Center
- Bill Ford Center - Dearborn
- Dearborn West

Outside of Michigan:

- Kansas City, Mo.

- Louisville, Ky.

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'Soup kitchen' serves spaghetti to homeless

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News  
Friday, January 26, 2007 10:08 AM EST

Dowagiac's experimental "soup kitchen" actually served spaghetti.

"We've had 15 to 20 people," said Margaret Shultz, community resources coordinator for the state Department of Human Services Cass County office in Cassopolis. "We didn't have any clue" how many to expect, "and when it was snowing this morning on my way into work, I was afraid nobody was going to be here."

Also heartening to the homeless counters who sponsored Thursday's soup kitchen was that people who did venture out carried information back to friends who were more reluctant to appear.

"I think it went great," Shultz said mid-afternoon of the 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. event at Second Baptist Church.

"We've never done this before. Every year we have to do a homeless count, which we normally do with caseworkers going through their files and counting all the people they know are homeless. We're still doing that, but the state put some money out in small \$1,000 grants for counties to do these special events connected to the homeless count today."

"It's amazing how many people we've seen today who didn't know where to go or who their worker was or didn't have a way to get there," Shultz said.

"It's kind of nice because all the different agencies which have been here, we can do some linkages. The first couple I talked to this morning, CAA (Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency, which has an office in Cassopolis) helped them out with a part of it, (DHS) helped them out with a part of it, then we sent them over to St. Vincent DePaul (on W. Railroad Street) so they could get coats.

"They had a lot of needs. All together, we could sit down at the table and figure out who could do what part. It's a comfortable atmosphere. They didn't have to come in to our office (on M-60, between Cass District Library and the Law and Courts Building) and sit in the lobby. This is closer. These people were in Castle Inn motel here in Dowagiac. Their car's barely running, so getting back and forth to Cassopolis is not the easiest thing in the world."

"This has been a very good experience," Shultz said.

Walter Swann, the Police Athletic League (PAL) boxing coach, said, "It would be nice to have a soup kitchen in the winter months to help people out."

"The sense of community" helps, Shultz said. Precariously housed or homeless people tend to be somewhat isolated. "They don't have family or people who can help them out or take them in," she said. "Just being able to make some connections is a really important part of the whole process. (Outreach) is something we're going to have to be thinking about. We could be a lot more friendly sometimes at the agencies."

"When people think of homeless, they think of people living in boxes on the street over steam," Shultz said. "We don't see that in rural areas, but I'll betcha you there are barns that have people in them. We know there are people who live in tents in the summer time. And lots of people are doubled up, staying wherever they can until the landlord figures out they're there. That's more of the kind of homelessness we see."

Rural homeless "are a lot more hidden," she said, "which makes it harder because there's not so much public will to do something about it because people think it doesn't exist."

The Jan. 25 soup kitchen was funded by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) through a Project Homeless Connect Grant.

January 26, 2007

## **EMERSON TELLS 3 AGENCIES HOW TO FIX OVERSPENDING**

The three departments that overspent their 2005-06 budgets have been given strict limits on a variety of spending decisions and been told the State Budget Office will oversee many budgetary functions to “ensure that this situation does not recur.”

Budget Director Bob Emerson sent letters this week Human Services Director Marianne Udow, Corrections Director Patricia Caruso and State Police Director Peter Munoz outlining the steps to make sure the departments don’t run into the same problem in the current fiscal year.

While departments overspending has occurred in most of the last 15 years, the three departments and the administration of Governor Jennifer Granholm have been slammed by Republicans for the incidents. The House Appropriations Committee, before Democrats took control of the chamber, held a hearing on the issue and the Senate Appropriations Committee is planning a hearing on it next week.

The letters say essentially the same thing to all three departments – which combined overspent their budgets by \$69 million at the end of the last fiscal year – telling them that “effective immediately”:

- The departments must finalize their spending plans with the State Budget Office;
- The departments should review purchasing authority within the department and if need revoke or limit individual authority. Each department has to report to the budget office about what actions it has taken to meet the requirements by February 23;
- The State Budget Office has revoked each department’s ability to override the system used to control overspending;
- The budget office is putting each department’s allotment on monthly instead the regular quarterly basis;
- The budget office is revoking each department’s ability to hire outside of the state’s hiring freeze any person below the Civil Service’s level 13 classification, and directing that any hiring has to be done with the budget office’s approval; and
- All contracts for \$250,000 or more have to be approved by the budget office before they can be let for bid and all equipment purchases over \$5,000 have to be approved by the budget office.

A spokesperson for DHS said the department was implementing the directives. A spokesperson for Corrections had not yet seen the requirements, and a spokesperson for the State Police could not be reached.

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January 28, 2007

## More savings are possible to avoid raising state taxes

### The Detroit News

Right now, the state is careening toward a tax increase. Objections are met with the rejoinder, "what should be cut?" But that assumes state government is operating at maximum efficiency now, and there is no choice but to either raise taxes or eliminate vital services.

Similarly, local governments are pressuring the state to raise taxes so more revenue-sharing can be redistributed to them, or asking for changes in laws that would allow them to raise more taxes locally.

But after a lot of talk last term about "reinventing government" and "thinking outside of the box" from Gov. Jennifer Granholm, not a lot has happened to fundamentally change the structure of government in this state or reduce barriers to savings.

So here are just a few ideas to consider before passing a tax increase:

**Prisons:** Michigan continues to have a higher incarceration rate than its neighbors. In 2005, the last year for which state comparisons are available, Michigan's prisoners per 100,000 of population, at 489, was the highest in the Great Lakes. It exceeded the Midwest average by more than 100 prisoners. A state Corrections Department spokesman notes that if Michigan had the same incarceration rate as the average of the Great Lakes states, the state could save as much as \$500 million annually on prison beds.

Michigan also spends about \$190 million in medical care for prisoners. A huge proportion of that skews toward chronically ill or geriatric prisoners. Wouldn't the wisest course be to commute their sentences and place them in facilities where Medicaid or Medicare would up pick their costs?

**Intermediate school districts:** Michigan maintains 57 intermediate school districts. Both the Citizens Research Council of Michigan and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy have noted that the tasks for which they were created back in the 1950s have largely evaporated. Eliminating them would not wipe out all of their costs.

But they could be consolidated, or their services contracted out to private firms. A few years ago, the Mackinac Center totaled the cost of intermediate school districts at more than \$800 million. Just tweaking some of their responsibilities, the center estimates, could save \$32 million.

**Civil Rights Department:** Michigan maintains a separate Civil Rights Department with around 130 employees and a budget of more than \$12 million to investigate and combat discrimination. Yet a host of federal agencies, including the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, exist to do the same thing.

**Medicaid:** The state spends more than \$4 billion on Medicaid. The Heritage Foundation notes that Florida and South Carolina are experimenting with voucher systems to impose market discipline on the programs.

Why not try something like that here? Or at the least, be more aggressive in trying to recover Medicaid costs from the estates of recipients, which could yield tens of millions of dollars.

These are just a few ideas for saving money if the governor were truly willing to "think outside the box" before raising taxes.

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## State must impose hiring freeze if it offers employees early outs

### EDITORIAL

Two Republican state legislators say they will introduce bills to allow Michigan state employees to retire early in an effort to address Lansing's budget deficit.

Such plans must be approached carefully and have to be tied to a hiring freeze if they are to provide any real benefit.

Rep. Fulton Sheen, R-Plainwell, and Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, announced they plan to introduce legislation this year that would allow state employees to take "early-out" retirements. In Jones' case, he plans to reintroduce his proposal for early retirements, which failed to gain support last year.

Both lawmakers say their plans would help the state combat a \$1 billion deficit in the current budget year. Sheen said his plan could save the state millions of dollars.

Sheen proposes an early retirement option for state, judicial, administrative and legislative employees whose combined age and years on the job total 75. An employee who chooses to leave early could get an incentive payment of 1.75 times his or her average annual salary.

Jones' legislation is similar, except that the combined years of service and age would have to equal 80.

Sheen and Jones are on the right track. Their plans could work, but with one caveat: There must be an accompanying hiring freeze on state positions.

For early retirements to make any real dent in state spending, those employees who leave cannot be replaced.

If the state allows veteran employees to retire early without a hiring freeze in place, Michigan taxpayers will pay more money for longer retirement periods, in addition to paying salary and benefits for new employees to replace them. Simply shedding higher-seniority employees only to replace them with entry-level replacements won't work.

The early outs would benefit employees who are young enough to leave and seek other employment. But the people of Michigan should not be left holding the bag for that opportunity.

State government has been down this road before. A 2002 early retirement buyout saw the state shed 8,000 employees who recognized a good deal when they saw one. But here it is 2006, and the state still faces a budget crisis.

We caution Oakland County's representatives and senators to approach this idea with extreme caution and ensure that such a proposal is tied to a hiring freeze so that taxpayers are not socked twice. It's fairly well-documented that the government is bloated and that legislators and executives from the governor on down have been hesitant to trim the fat there. But if the Legislature is really serious about cutting costs, why not simply have layoffs to reduce staff?

And when the employees who are now near retirement finally make the decision to go, don't replace them and save even more money.

Michigan can no longer afford the "fat" that is in the executive and legislative branches of government.

For any good diet to work, you need discipline and a change in your daily routine to take off the weight and keep it off. Lansing must change its mind-set if it is to do the same - and the sooner the better.

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## News Release

Contact: Maureen Sorbet or Karen Stock (517) 373-7394

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### Shiawassee County collaborative receives \$120,000 Great Start Collaborative grant

*Early Childhood Investment Corporation grants focus on early childhood development and care*

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**January 29, 2007**

**CORUNNA** – The Shiawassee County Great Start Collaborative today accepted a \$120,000 grant from the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) to strengthen early childhood development and care in the county.

Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow and ECIC Chief Operating Officer Mike Foley presented a ceremonial check to Shiawassee County Regional Education Service District Superintendent John Hagel.

The grant is part of a \$3.15 million award to 21 Great Start Collaboratives across Michigan that coordinate community resources and supports to help children from birth to age five and their families. A total of 70 percent of Michigan's poor and minority children now live in a county where a Great Start Collaborative is being convened.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, announced in Governor Jennifer Granholm's 2005 State of the State address, provides grants from a mix of public and private funding sources. Grant funding was made possible in August 2006 when the Michigan Legislature approved a \$1 million appropriation for early childhood collaboratives across the state. This appropriation triggered matching funds from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Fourteen other state collaboratives were funded earlier in 2006 by the Department of Human Services.

"These grants will help bring together the public and private sectors including government, business, civic, faith, education, and community groups to develop a long-standing, sustained focus on early learning and childhood development," ECIC CEO Judy Samelson said. "We're grateful for the support of our partners who recognize the importance of investing in early childhood programs."

Intermediate school districts will act as fiduciaries for the grants. In addition to the Shiawassee County Regional Education District, 21 intermediate school districts and regional education service agencies around the state also were awarded funding for planning and/or implementation of Great Start Collaboratives.

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“Children who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs are better prepared to enter elementary school, are more likely to pursue secondary education and have lower dropout rates and higher high school graduation rates,” Udow said. “By improving the skills of a large fraction of the workforce, these programs for poor children will reduce poverty and strengthen the state’s ability to compete in the global market.”

ECIC is a unique public, nonprofit corporation created to invest in Michigan's youngest citizens. By educating, motivating and involving Michigan citizens in efforts to build and promote a system of supports for young children and their families, all Michigan children can make a Great Start!

For more information about the ECIC, visit <http://www.ecic4kids.org>

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JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM  
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN  
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW  
DIRECTOR

## News Release

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### Children's Trust Fund Board names 2007 officers

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**January 29, 2007**

LANSING -- The Children's Trust Fund of Michigan Board of Directors recently named officers for 2007. Nancy Moody continues as chairwoman of the board, an appointment made by Governor Jennifer M. Granholm.

Others elected to leadership positions include Anita Fox as vice chair, Carol Wolenberg as secretary and Paul Shaheen as secretary.

Committee chairs are appointed by Moody with the consensus of the board. For 2007, the following individuals will lead these committees:

- Moody will chair the Executive Committee.
- Wolenberg will chair the Finance Committee.
- DHS Director Marianne Udow will chair the Audit Committee.
- Scott Stevenson will chair the Marketing and Fund Development Committee.
- Shaheen and Rebecca Bahar-Cook will co-chair the Program Committee.

CTF provides grants for public education, training and technical assistance, and funds a network of local, community-based child abuse prevention programs and services across the state. It is the only statewide nonprofit organization solely dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect in Michigan.

Established by state law in 1982, the CTF is guided by a 15-member board of directors, 10 of whom are appointed by the governor with advice and consent of the Senate. CTF does not receive state appropriations and is funded by interest income from a restricted trust fund and direct donations, including the Children's License Plate and an income tax check-off box.

**For more information about the Children's Trust Fund, go to [www.michigan.gov/ctf](http://www.michigan.gov/ctf)**

**For more information about the Department of Human Services, go to [www.michigan.gov/dhs](http://www.michigan.gov/dhs)**

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